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Representative Jeff Morris

House of Representatives

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Dear Friend,

Hardly a day goes by when the newspaper headlines aren't screaming about the great economic boom Washington state is enjoying. And, no doubt about it, Seattle and its suburbs are doing very well.

But up here in Northwest Washington (and in other rural areas of the state), it's somewhat of a different picture. Here, the state's roaring economy isn't reaching far enough off the I-5 corridor to help all of Washington's working families.

In fact, you might say that our state is at the top of a bottom: we possess the nation's *worst* economic disparity between rural and urban regions.

Well, I don't happen to believe finding a good job should depend on where you live. For three years now I have continued to press for improved rural economic development assistance from the State -- not more programs, but better help.

Why? When you allowed me the chance to represent you in Olympia I heard from many of you about the desire to have your children and grand kids nearby. But because so many local people had to move to Seattle or even to California in order to find a family-wage job, too many families ended up no where near home. I heard from classmates and peers who expressed frustration over the lack of good jobs that could keep them in the place they grew up and call home.

I wanted to change that. After three years of work I enthusiastically report to you that we have had success. This past legislative session the legislature:

- Made monies available to local county governments for improving roads, water, sewer and important telecommunications links. This was done with no tax increases.
- Increased telecommunications access (bandwidth) to rural communities.
- Increased access to worker training and retraining.
- For the first time, Whatcom and San Juan Counties have been added to the rural county list and are eligible to receive state help.

The job is now up to you. You must contact your local county commissioners and council members to express how you think this money should be invested in your community. Without your input, monies such as these often end up being spent on pet pork projects instead of invested in the future our communities. And you may be sure that I will continue to fight for economic fairness in next years legislative session.

Sincerely,

Jeff Morris

Representative

Jeff Morris

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Rural infrastructure pivotal:

What does a prospective new business look for when it's on the hunt for new locations? And what does an existing business look for when it's trying to decide whether to expand — or to even stay open? After talking with business leaders the last three years, I'm convinced *infrastructure* is the key. Let's face it, a business is not going to put up a new building and wait up to a year to have the water, sewer, and phones hooked up.

A bill I ushered through the last legislative session will help rural communities make improvements in their infrastructure. The new policy allows them to retain twice as much of their sales-tax revenue — rather than send it to state coffers. Rural areas can then strengthen their railroad and port facilities, install water and sewer lines, and improve roads and telecommunications— all things that help attract new industries to our area.

Unfortunately, some counties will try to build things that accommodate existing needs instead of looking at what kind of new jobs they would like to have. It is up to you to let your county officials know how you want this money spent and what your priorities are for infrastructure that will attract jobs you want to your communities. I believe these decisions are best made locally instead of Olympia. Your participation is key to making this work, however.

Whatcom and San Juan Counties now on list for rural assistance.

Whatcom and San Juan Counties are now on the list of rural counties that can hold back sales tax monies for infrastructure investment. Whatcom County has been on and off the “distressed county” list for the past decade. While Bellingham does well, the rest of the county has struggled, not getting resources necessary for economic improvement.

For the first time San Juan County will receive economic assistance. While many view San Juan County as affluent, the reality is that many citizens can not afford to live and work in the Islands.

Training and retraining:

At the same time traditional forestry and fishing jobs are being lost, Washington employers are unable to find applicants with the right job skills, particularly those in the high-tech industries. Nearly 60,000 high-paying, high-tech jobs will be created in Washington over the next three years, without nearly enough people trained to fill them. Such a rapidly-changing economy means our citizens need access to continued education-- a system of lifelong learning.

To meet these challenges, we proposed a new Workforce Development Board and local workforce development councils to streamline workforce placement now being served by 42 different state and federal programs.

This legislation did not pass in 1999, due to the dynamics of a 49-49 tie in the House, but I will be pushing it as part of my agenda again in 2000.

Telecommunications:

In every commercial way, bandwidth will be the farm-to-market roads of the 21st century. As we become more reliant on the Internet--and more bandwidth hungry, I fear that dense population centers like Seattle will get more capacity, while rural Washington will get less. In effect, this will create segregation when it comes to electronic commerce. This is unacceptable--the legislature must make sure that we have One Washington when it comes to economic opportunity.

I introduced a bill last session that would have done several things: freeze the rate for basic single-line, touch-tone service at today's dollars for perpetuity; deregulate rates for all other telephone services only after genuine competition exists; establish rules for real competition between companies and technologies; and create B&O tax credits for telecommunications companies that open up services to rural communities.

We were not able to get this bill passed, but I will continue to see this vital issue through.